

A Trauma-Informed Toolkit

# Knowledge & Strategies

For Teachers & Staff



# **A consultation project between the Penn Consortium for Mental Health and Optimal Development and the Chester County Intermediate Unit.**

## **Contributors:**

### **Andy Danilchick**

Director of the Consortium for Mental Health and Optimal Development  
University of Pennsylvania

### **Dr. Siobhan Leavy**

Director of Student Services  
Chester County Intermediate Unit

### **Catherine Mink**

Director of Toolbox Projects  
University of Pennsylvania

Researchers and Authors: **Grace Daley and Leah Middleberg**

Toolbox Advisory Committee: **Jesse Bogush, Leah Rider, Brian Schneider, Karen Taratuski and Maureen Wilkins**

Consultants and Field Experts: **Dr. Mike Nakkula, Matthew Portell and Dr. Caroline Watts**



# Introduction

## What is Trauma?

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), trauma results from “an event, series of events or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being.” Trauma may result from events that happened directly to a child or that a child witnessed. For instance, witnessing harm to a loved one may elicit a trauma response from a child. It is critical to note that trauma can affect everyone, regardless of age, race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation or socioeconomic status.

### Reference:

[Trauma and Violence](#)

## Trauma In Children and Adolescents: Adverse Childhood Experiences

While trauma can affect everyone regardless of age, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are experiences that include physical and emotional abuse, neglect, caregiver mental illness and/or household violence and are specific to children aged 0-17. In 1995, an original study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) only identified three ACEs. As of 2023, the CDC cites many more ACEs that children may experience. ACEs are incredibly common, with approximately 64% of adults in the US reporting that they experienced one or more ACE by the time they were 18 years old. While ACEs are ubiquitous across populations, certain groups who have historically experienced inequities are more likely to experience several ACEs. All ACEs present potentially long-term consequences for individuals’ physical and emotional health; however, those with multiple ACEs are at even greater risk for job insecurity, unhealthy relationships, depression and chronic diseases, including heart disease, suicide and cancer. Considering the commonality of ACEs, it is important that educators treat all students as if they may have experienced an ACE even if it is not outwardly apparent.

## Examples of ACEs:

- Physical or Emotional Abuse
- Physical or Emotional Neglect
- Caregiver Mental Illness
- Caregiver Substance Use and Abuse
- Household Violence or Witnessing Intimate Partner Violence
- Food Insecurity
- Poverty
- Discrimination
- War
- Community Violence

**Note:** Trauma is a highly individual experience with all who have experienced it responding to the initial and long-term impact differently. Trauma may present itself in children through reactivity, withdrawal, aggression and perfection. Additionally, children may not present any outward signs of trauma. It is important to be attentive to both children who have outward modes of coping but also those who may choose to cope in silence.

### References:

[Fast Facts: Preventing Childhood Adverse Experiences](#)

[What are ACEs?](#)



# How Does Trauma Affect Development?

## Trauma and Brain Development:

When a child experiences harmful events or lives in a chronically stressful environment it forces their brain into constant survival mode, which in the literature is known as **toxic stress**. It is important to note that stress is not always bad. In fact, having some stress in our lives can be a good thing as it motivates us to get out of bed in the morning.

Stress becomes toxic when it is persistent and intense. This persistent stress leads to hyperarousal of our sympathetic nervous system which is responsible for fight, flight and freeze. When children are frequently in this survival state it changes the neural structures of their brain, making everyday situations, like school, seem inherently threatening.

### Reference:

[Toxic Stress](#)

## What is the Role of Educators in Assisting Children with Trauma? What is the Goal?

After reading information on trauma, you may be thinking, “What can I do to help?” Often, we pursue a career in education because of our passion and desire to support the growth and learning of children. While this passion is valuable, it is also important to understand how you can help and how you cannot.

## Tips for Addressing Trauma with Students:

| Promises Teachers Can't Keep         | Promises Teachers Can Keep                                                                              |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| This won't ever happen to you again. | There are a lot of people who want to help you. I will always care about you.                           |
| I can fix this.                      | I am here to help you. It is my job.                                                                    |
| You don't have to worry anymore.     | This is not your fault. What has happened to you is not fair and I am sorry you have to deal with this. |
| I won't let you down.                | You don't have to cope with this alone.                                                                 |
| It will be okay.                     | It sounds like there are some really hard things going on that you wish would stop.                     |

**When addressing trauma in the classroom, there are six principles we should keep in mind:**

## 6 PRINCIPLES OF TRAUMA-INFORMED, RESILIENCE-ORIENTED SCHOOLS

- » Safety

*Ensuring physical, academic, social, behavioral, and emotional safety in the school community*

- » Trustworthiness

*Maximizing trustworthiness through task clarity, consistency, and interpersonal boundaries between all members of the school community*

- » Student Voice and Empowerment

*Maximizing student and family input, choice and control*

- » Collaboration

*Facilitating collaboration and sharing power*

- » Peer Support

*Providing help and support for each other, for both students and staff*

- » Inclusion and Engagement

*Practicing inclusion, seeking to prevent discrimination, and celebrating the unique aspects of our school community*

The goal of trauma-informed teaching is to embed these values into daily school practices and create environments that acknowledge the effects of trauma without retraumatizing children. **The ultimate goal is supporting the positive development of students, staff and teachers without neglect.**

## **Toolkit Structure:**

This toolkit has been designed to bring together the most up-to-date, evidence-based and useful strategies for educators and school staff to use in classrooms, hallways and playgrounds. The toolkit is aimed to address trauma at a general student-body level, classroom level and individual level. Each section will provide brief introductions and examples of trauma-informed practice followed by ready-to-use strategies. The focus of this toolkit is to provide educators with actionable strategies that can be implemented whenever needed. It is important to note that these strategies are simply that: strategies. They may not work in every situation or for every child; therefore, it is important to test them and modify the strategies to fit the needs of your classroom and school.



# **Section 1: What Does Trauma Look Like in the Classroom**

## **Trauma in The Classroom:**

Children who have experienced trauma may perceive everyday situations as potentially threatening. The feeling of having to constantly be on alert or in fear may present itself in a variety of ways.

## **Language and Communication Skills:**

Traumatic experiences may make it difficult for some children to employ language and verbal information as a vehicle for communication. This may make it difficult for children to develop literacy skills and healthy social relationships. For instance, if a child is hyper-aroused due to trauma, it may make it difficult for them to focus and attend to pertinent academic information. In social situations, children affected by trauma may struggle using language to convey their feelings and needs in an adaptive manner.

## **Taking Another's Perspective:**

Beyond struggling to express their emotions and needs through healthy communication, children affected by trauma may struggle to engage in perspective taking. Trauma has been linked to poor self-identity and self-concept, which in turn may make it difficult for children to assess what others are thinking. Additionally, if a child has experienced isolation, they may not have the same level of play or social experience as other peers their age (Helping Traumatized Children Learn, 2005).

## **Regulating Emotions:**

Children who have experienced trauma may struggle to regulate their impulses, have aggression toward themselves or others, have trouble interpreting emotional signals and have a chronic uncertainty about the reliability of others (Cicchetti & Shields). Regulation of emotions may present differently with some children reacting impulsively and oversensitive while others may appear disconnected or aloof (Helping Traumatized Children Learn, 2005).

## **Engaging in and Being Attentive to the Curriculum:**

Children affected by trauma may appear distracted or unfocused in the classroom. It is possible that the child is attempting to interpret the teacher's mood or is disassociating from the environment entirely. The challenge of staying engaged in material may make it difficult for children to keep up with classroom tasks.



# Quick Check: Signs of a Trauma Response in the Classroom

## Reactivity and Impulsivity

- A response to a situation that appears disproportionate to the situation's severity

## Aggression

- Verbal and physical aggression toward teachers, staff and other peers

## Defiance

- Includes refusal to respond to teachers
- Taking control of the situation through defiant behavior
- Freezing in response to instruction
- Unwilling to participate in classroom activities

## Withdrawal

- Retracting from teachers and peers
- Refusal to engage in the classroom
- Appearing aloof or disconnected from the present environment

## Perfectionism

- Easily frustrated and give up when they encounter difficulties
- Uncompromising struggle for academic and social success/achievement



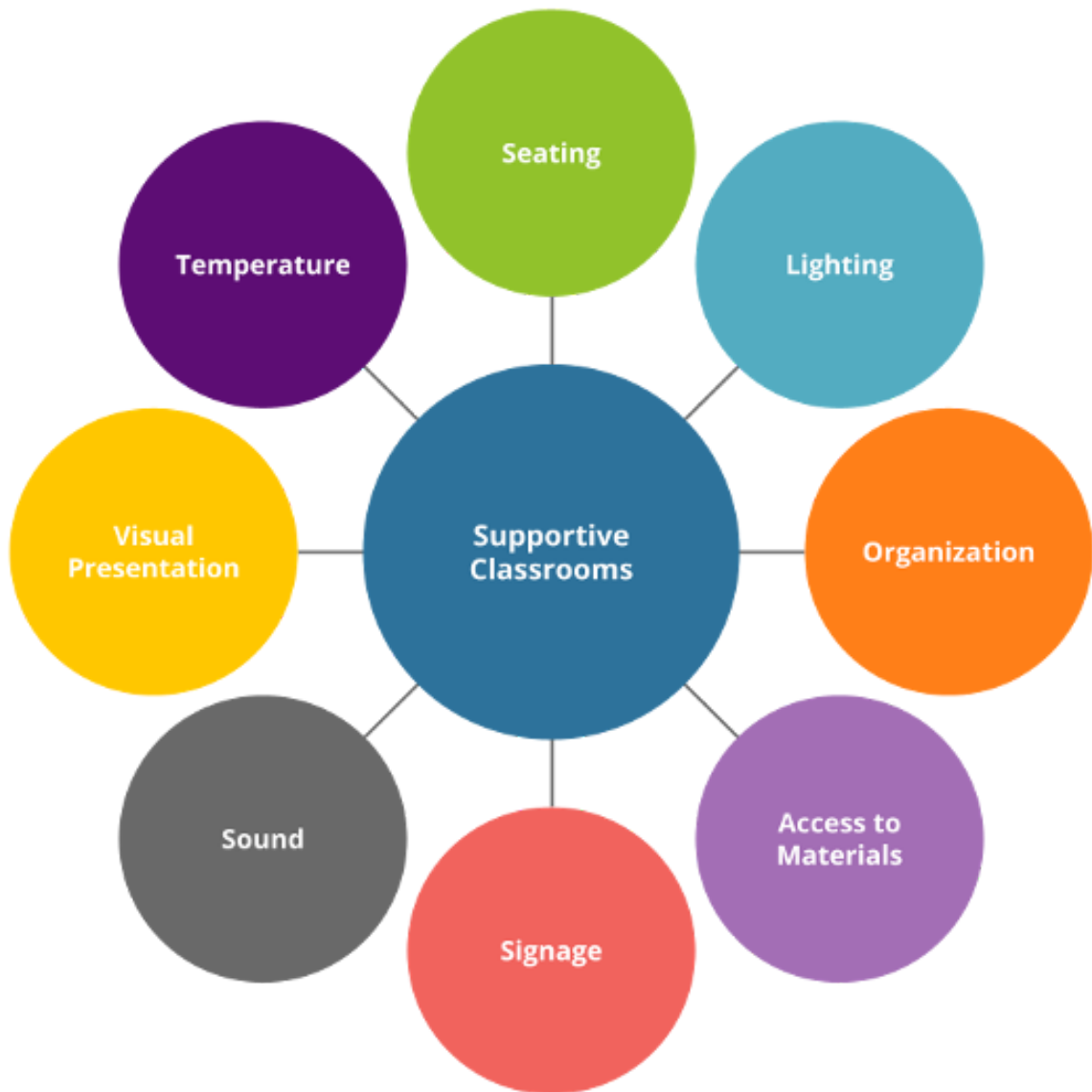
## Section 2: Strategies in the Classroom and Beyond

### Setting Up Your Classroom for Success:

#### Classroom Environment:

- What can teachers do prior to kids even stepping foot in the classroom to ensure safety?
- What can teachers do at the start of and throughout the school year to ensure safety?
  - Set classroom norms
- How are teachers thinking of their teaching sessions?
  - Are they chunked or do they have one long block of teaching?
- Integrating movement (e.g., short movement breaks to help students reset and regulate, reduce stress, and increase attention)
  - Stretching as a class, cross-lateral exercises, moving in patterns

## Environmental Concerns for Supportive Classrooms



### Reference:

[Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Schools Toolkit](#)

The physical environment can play a large role in an individual's ability to focus and learn, further exacerbating attention difficulties associated with traumatic experiences. Considering how these different elements of the physical environment can affect one's attention in class is important for creating safe, inclusive classrooms. The following suggestions can support a safe, trauma-informed physical classroom environment. However, asking individuals explicitly what would make the classroom a better place for them to learn is especially helpful.

### Resources:

[Classroom Environment Assessment](#) can be used to have individuals anonymously provide feedback on the physical classroom environment.

[Universal Practices and Processes](#) can provide strategies to foster a positive classroom climate.



## Physical Spaces: Calming Tools, Kits and Spaces

### Calming Tools:

Small slinkies, Play-Doh, coloring books and stress balls can be used not only in your designated Peace Corner, but also throughout class periods.

For students who struggle with overstimulation and focus, focusing their attention on a tool such as Play-Doh may allow them to self-calm and be more attentive during classroom instruction.

### Peace Corners:

Creating a dedicated space within the classroom that students can use to decompress in times of stress and overstimulation. The purpose of these spaces is to provide students with a chance to regulate their emotions and behavior, not punish students for misbehavior.

Incorporating elements that provide comfort such as pillows, a comfortable chair, sensory toys (such as stress balls and play-doh), headphones to listen to soothing music, as well as paper and pens to journal or color/draw (e.g., [coloring mandalas](#)) can further help students self-regulate.

***Note:** While Peace Corner/Calm Corners originate from the Montessori method, they are not just for young children. A Peace Corner can help students of all ages take time to reflect and self-soothe.*

## **Focus Desks:**

Similar to Peace Corners, creating a dedicated work space for students who are having trouble focusing can not only help students self-regulate and complete the task at hand, but also reduce distractions for other classmates.

Set aside a couple of desks that are labeled and known to the class as a space for students to use when they need to focus. The expectations for this space should be included in your classroom norms.

## **Moveable Furniture:**

Moveable furniture is a great way to create opportunities for students to engage in a variety of activities.

Desks can be moved together to allow for collaboration, enhancing students' communication and interpersonal skills, or moved apart to allow for more separation and ability to work individually.

Swivel chairs allow educators to be able to seamlessly glide from one student to the next, addressing individual concerns in a non-confrontational or embarrassing manner.

## **Adjust Fluorescent Lighting:**

Harsh lighting, often found in schools, can be abrasive and distracting for some students. The use of full-spectrum light bulbs and/or covering fluorescent lights with curtains will help create a softer light in the classroom, thus creating a sense of warmth and safety.

## **Eliminate Excess Noise:**

Students affected by trauma, including those who have experienced domestic violence in the home and those who come from loud, urban environments, may find that excessive noise triggers a trauma response including reactivity, aggression and withdrawal.

Limiting excessive noise by closing the classroom door when teaching, having students raise their hands when participating and reducing activities where students are all talking at once can help create a calm and safe environment.

## **Temperature:**

Research suggests that 72 F is the ideal temperature for optimal performance in the classroom. If the temperature cannot be changed, allow students to wear layers to manage their comfort.



## Helpful Classroom Practices

### Setting Agreed Upon Classroom Norms

Many children affected by trauma struggle with environments that are inconsistent or where expectations are not clearly outlined.

At the beginning of the year and/or periodically throughout the school year, create a set of classroom norms that outline behavioral expectations in the classroom.

Frame these norms in a positive way. Rather than saying, “We will not hit each other,” we should say, “We will respect each other’s personal space.” This is more effective and feels less punitive to students.

Beyond setting norms, it is important to get buy-in from the students, as students are more likely to follow norms that they feel they had a say in. Creating these norms as a class may help with adherence as well as provide an opportunity for your class to form their own community.

### Chunking Learning Periods

Students of various ages have various attention spans, with young children around six years old being able to focus their attention for 12-18 minutes at a time.

Adolescents also struggle to maintain attention, with the average 16 year old being able to focus between 30 and 45 minutes at a time.

While classroom periods may be designated as an hour long, it may be beneficial to “chunk” these periods into sections that allow students to take mental breaks and refocus their attention.

**Note:** *Beyond helping students take a moment to reset and regroup, this can also be a time for educators to regroup and refocus. They can use this time to identify students who may need additional support and create a strategy to enhance student engagement.*

Mental breaks can include planned movement or time for students to get up and use the restroom.

Beyond mental breaks, chunking the period into differing activities is another mode of creating mental separation. For instance, you may instruct students for twenty minutes and then have them transition to group work, allowing them to refocus their attention.

**Reference:**

[Average Attention Span](#)



## **Integrating Planned Movement**

Children and adolescents often struggle to maintain their focus for extended periods of time and focus and attention may be even more difficult for those who are affected by trauma

The ability to physically change our immediate surroundings helps our brain take a pause and reset, thus allowing us to refocus and self-regulate.

Integrating planned movement into your curriculum can allow students to refocus and also release some built-up energy.

Planned movement can include having students stand up and stretch, cross-lateral exercises, walking around the classroom and guided breathing practices.

**Resource:**

[Preventing Escalation in the Classroom](#)



## Teacher-Student Relationships

### The Importance of Belonging and “One Close Adult”

It is often a mission of schools to create communities that foster belonging. However, for children affected by trauma the need to feel like they belong and are wanted in the community is especially valuable. The field of resilience has underscored the need for caring and supportive relationships with adults and peers. It has been found that children who have experienced more conflict or disadvantages in their home life benefit the most from supportive relationships with educators (Doll et al., 2009; Pianta, 2006).



When teachers foster relationships with their students, it provides emotional security, motivates students to achieve and boosts self-esteem (Masten, 2014). For many students affected by trauma, they may not get their basic needs of caring and support at home. Thus, educators can often fill those missing needs. Additionally, close relationships with students give educators a chance to identify students who may be experiencing abuse or neglect, allowing for quicker and more responsive intervention (Masten, 2014).

## How Teachers Can Build Relationships and Get to Know Each Student

### Reference:

[The Developmental Relationships Framework](#)

Specific strategies that may be helpful in fostering relationships with students are noted below. It is important to keep these fundamental principles of belonging and relationships in mind as you proceed with these strategies.

### Purpose of Relationships with Students:

- » **Express care:** Show me that I matter to you by being trustworthy, paying attention when I speak and valuing what I say, showing you enjoy the time with me, and praising me for my effort even if it does not lead to achievement.
- » **Challenge growth:** By expecting me to do my best and pushing me to keep getting better. Helping me to take responsibility for errors and learn from them.
- » **Provide support:** Guide me through difficult situations and assignments, stand up for me when I need that, and put limits in place that keep me from moving off track.
- » **Share power:** Treat me with respect by treating me seriously and fairly, including me in decisions about my education, working with me to solve problems, and providing new opportunities for me to grow.
- » **Expand possibilities:** Connect me with people and places that broaden my world and open my eyes to new opportunities.<sup>12</sup>

## Building Trust and Safety with Students Who Have Experienced Trauma

### BRAVING:

- **B**oundaries
- **R**eliability
- **A**ccountability
- **V**ault
- **I**ntegrity
- **N**on-judgement
- **G**enerosity

## Ask Students Their Names

At the very start of the school year, ask students their names and how to pronounce them. Students from different backgrounds often feel excluded if teachers cannot pronounce their names; therefore, learning to pronounce names correctly can be a sign of respect and inclusion in your classroom.

If a student's name is difficult to pronounce, asking them to spell their name phonetically may help.

Asking students if they have a preferred name or pronoun also indicates that they belong here. Many students do not identify with their given names or sex, thus it is important to acknowledge their identity and/or the name that they choose.

## **Call Each Student by Their Name**

It is important to consistently call each student by their name.

Calling students directly by their name not only tells them that you know who they are, but more importantly, shows that you are taking interest and care in getting to know them.

When students feel overwhelmed, addressing them by their names may help ground them. It shows that you are ready to actively listen to their needs and challenges.

## **Incorporate “Getting to Know You” Activities into Daily Teaching**

The need for belonging is vital in supporting all children, regardless of trauma status. In a 70-year longitudinal study of children, it was found that students with a close relationship to a teacher or other school-adult were more likely to be engaged in school and succeed academically.

There are many simple activities that can be incorporated into daily teaching that may allow you to learn about your students, beyond academics. For instance, if you are teaching a lesson on different cultures, then asking students about their own family traditions allows them to relate to the lesson. It also allows you to get to know more about the lives of your students.

Link to a resource that provides a range of inclusive “getting to know you” questions and topics.

### **References:**

[101 Inclusive Get-To-Know-You Questions for Students](#)

[Why Every Student Needs Caring Adults](#)

## **Maintain Academic Challenge**

While one might assume that children affected by trauma need lessened academic standards, it is important for academic challenges to remain high and consistent. When one lowers the standards for a student, even if it comes from a compassionate place, the student may feel like they are stupid or worthless.

It is important to make academic expectations fit a student's abilities; however, it is also important to challenge students. When students meet social and academic goals, it increases feelings of competency and self-efficacy (Helping Traumatized Children Learn, 2005).

Beyond just setting academic goals for students, it is important to be aware of how you communicate these goals. The focus should be on fostering a growth mindset in which a student finds intelligence and abilities as malleable through effort, new strategies and support (Dweck, 2015). In the classroom, this could look like praising the process rather than the outcome. For instance, instead of saying, "Great job," you may want to try, "Wow! You worked through a lot of challenges to get here."

Additionally, when a child fails or is struggling with a concept, it is important to emphasize that an integral part of learning is trial and error. Presented below are ways to reframe statements to foster a growth mindset in children and encourage them to approach challenges rather than fear them.

# HOW TO ENCOURAGE STUDENTS

## Growth Mindset

What to say:

“When you learn how to do a new kind of problem, it grows your math brain!”

“If you catch yourself saying, ‘I’m not a math person,’ just add the word ‘yet’ to the end of the sentence.”

“That feeling of math being hard is the feeling of your brain growing.”

“The point isn’t to get it all right away. The point is to grow your understanding step by step. What can you try next?”

## Fixed Mindset

What not to say:

“Not everybody is good at math. Just do your best.”

“That’s OK, maybe math is not one of your strengths.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get it if you keep trying.”\*

\*If students are using the wrong strategies, their efforts might not work. Plus they may feel particularly inept if their efforts are fruitless.

“Great effort! You tried your best.”\*

\*Don’t accept less than optimal performance from your students.

## References:

[Growth Mindset vs. Fixed Mindset](#)

[Carol Dweck Revisits the “Growth Mindset”](#)



## **Fostering Peer to Peer Relationships:**

It is important for students to feel a sense of belonging not only with educators, but also with their peers. For students who use withdrawal and isolation as a coping mechanism, it may be difficult for them to reach out to peers. Creating community cohorts of students may incorporate a community of support for students affected by trauma.

Community cohorts or buddy systems are essentially predetermined cohorts of students who are intended to be the go-to people for support. These cohorts should be relatively small, approximately 5-8 students, and should function as positive sources of community and care for students.

When crafting your classroom norms for the year, you may want to spend time crafting norms and expectations for community cohorts, allowing students to determine what they expect from their peers. Beyond creating community cohorts, it is important to observe who students connect with. It is critical to identify if students have at least one close friend. This friend may be someone who can act as a point-person for that student if they need care.

## **Addressing Problem Behaviors and Discipline:**

In recent years, discipline has been a controversial topic. In the past, many disciplinary practices were exclusionary and disproportionately applied to students of color and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While consequences for behavior that violates community norms is important, it is also important that students return to the community. The goal of discipline is to stop or limit unwanted

behaviors without inadvertently telling students that they do not belong or that they are not wanted. Ultimately, when enforcing consequences, the message should be: “I want you back in my classroom.”

## What Should Consequences Look Like?

As much as possible, consequences should not be exclusionary. Similar to Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) models, consequences should be viewed in a tiered manner. Most students do not require intense consequences; it needs to be communicated to them, in an effective way, that their behavior does not meet community norms. Just as in MTSS/PBIS models, there is a small minority of tier 3 students who require more intensive consequences. For instance, if a student violates norms to such an egregious or dangerous extent, like bringing a weapon to school, the situation may require more intensive consequences and discussions.

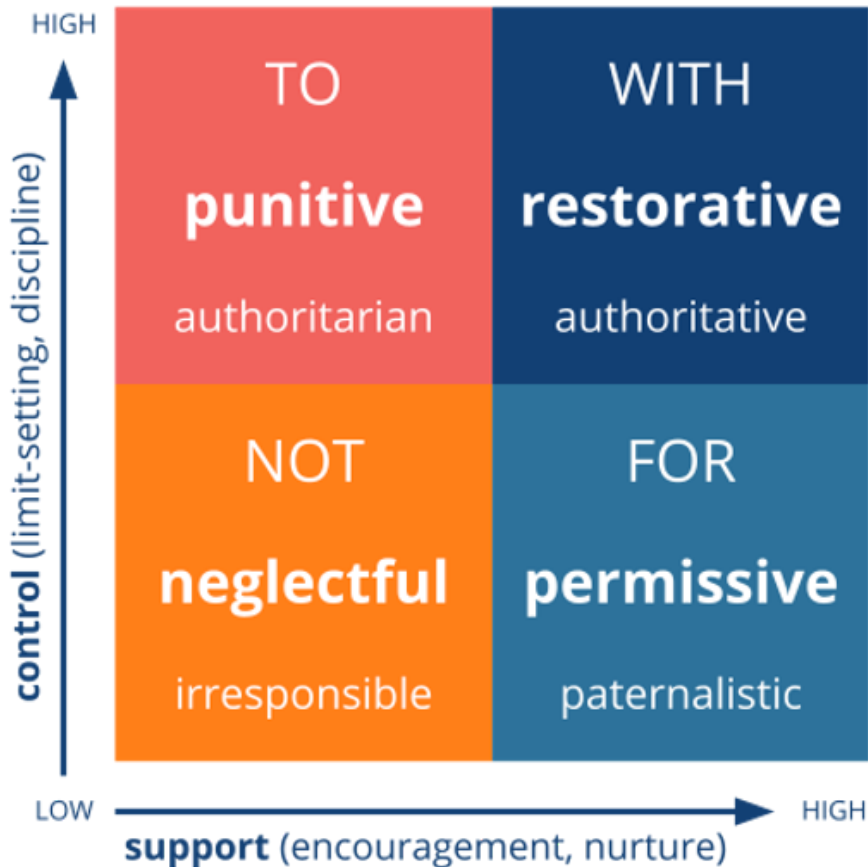
In general, consequences should be clear and consistent. Just with community norms, expectations and what behaviors/actions would be violations of those norms should be clear. There should be no ambiguity in rules or regulations, as ambiguity often leads to certain students being disproportionately affected by discipline.

Beyond consequences being clear, they need to be consistently applied. **It is important to note that consistency does not mean the same across students. For consequences, it is important to focus on equity rather than equality.** While it may seem unfair for students to have different consequences for similar behavior, it is more effective to have consequences that will work rather than those that are the same. For instance, some students do not find that being told to leave the classroom is a consequence. In fact, some students may act out in order to be told to leave. For these students, moving them to the front of the classroom may be more effective. For other students, the ability to not interact with peers may feel like a consequence, thus putting them at a desk where they cannot interact with other students may be effective. If you determine a consequence-plan for a student, it is important that it is enforced consistently, so they know what to expect.

**Most importantly, when enforcing consequences, it is key that you emphasize that you want the student back in the classroom community.** Specifically stating that you want them to come back and be present (after they have calmed down or understand why their behavior did not fit community norms) is critical in helping students understand that they are wanted and belong in the classroom.

**Note: It is important to meet kids where they are and not pick a consequence for a child that they cannot do.** For instance, if a child has ADHD, making the child sit in silence without moving would not be effective, as they might not be able to do so.

# Social Discipline Window



## Resource:

[Social Discipline Window](#)

## Addressing Collective Traumas Including Gun Violence

It is an unfortunate reality in the United States (US) that many students have either directly or indirectly experienced the effects of gun-violence. While some communities may be more impacted than others, all schools across the US have some sort of active shooter training. While the impacts of such trainings on student and teacher well-being are still in their infancy, there is some preliminary evidence that they can be anxiety provoking, especially for those affected by trauma.

Students affected by trauma may be more sensitive to situations and events than other students. Active shooter drills may trigger students affected by trauma to become hyper-reactive or hyper-withdrawn, due to the physiological response of their sympathetic nervous system. It is important that educators are aware of these responses in both trauma-affected students and the general student body. There are a few strategies that schools may choose to implement to ensure that they are keeping their students both physically and emotionally safe

throughout these drills.

1. **Talk to students and their families about why you are having drills.**

It is important that the reasoning behind such drills is explicitly explained to parents and students so that there is no confusion about their purpose. **It should be made clear that these drills are for the sole purpose of keeping students safe.**

2. **Inform parents and students when drills will be occurring.**

In the past, there was a tendency for drills to be a surprise, as they were supposed to replicate an actual active shooter situation. While drills should prepare students and staff for an emergency, they should not replicate an emergency. Informing students and parents about when drills will occur allows parents to prepare their students. Additionally, informing students beforehand can allow teachers to prepare students for what will happen, what the action plan is and what will happen afterwards.

3. **After drills, provide resources for students.**

After a drill, it is important to acknowledge what just happened and take a moment to ask students if they have any immediate feelings or thoughts that they would like to express. Providing students with immediate stress relieving activities can help them physiologically and mentally decompress from the stress of the drill. For instance, engaging in movement, going outside or practicing mindful breathing can help students calm and re-center. If students need resources beyond what is provided in the classroom, it is important that school counselors or social workers are available.

4. **Acknowledge that drills are difficult to navigate.**

This is a very simple strategy, but just acknowledging that drills are tough and hard validates students and their experiences. Sometimes all we need to hear is that what we are going through is difficult and that it is okay.





## **Commitment to Mental Health & Optimal Development [Self-Care] for Teachers**

Teachers and school staff are key members of the school community. They not only serve as educators, but also may act as parents, caregivers, friends and mentors to students. The need to provide constant care to students often leaves teachers forgetting or dismissing care for themselves.

While there are a lot of important resources about the importance of breathing, quality sleep and physical exercise, many of these resources do not help when teachers are feeling panic and stress in the moment. Just as community cohorts provide students with built-in systems of support, having teacher teams or teacher buddies can provide teachers with go-to people when they are in need. These teams can be formal or informal based on who teachers feel a natural connection to. These people should act as a go-to person if a teacher is struggling with their own mental well-being or needs a breather. The teams should be structured so that teachers can reach out via email or another school communication tool and know that someone is there to step in and help. For instance, a teacher may be overwhelmed and need a break. Thus, they could reach out to their teacher team and have someone watch their class for ten minutes while they take a breather.

Additionally, teachers may want to form a network of buddy classrooms that almost act as connected communities, teams or neighborhoods. Buddy classrooms help students form connections and close relationships with other students and can also act as a resource if a student needs a break or a change in physical space. For instance, if a student is having a lot of trouble focusing, sending them to their buddy classroom may allow them to regroup in a different space with different classmates. It may also help to assign a student in one classroom a buddy in another classroom, who can act as a teammate of support. If a student is having a rough day, they may take a walk with their buddy or eat lunch with their buddy to take a moment to regroup.



**Burnout refers to physical and emotional exhaustion as well as feeling ineffective, cynical and detached as a result of chronic occupational stress (World Health Organization, 2019).** Given the demands placed on educators as well as the potentially stressful nature of working with students who have experienced trauma, educators may be at an increased risk for symptoms of burnout and compassion fatigue without adequate stress-management.

While compassion fatigue specifically refers to the psychological, physical and emotional impact of helping others, the symptoms of burnout and compassion fatigue are similar and can include chronic fatigue, exhaustion, insomnia, impaired concentration, physical symptoms or illness, hopelessness, withdrawal, mood changes including anxiety, irritation, anger and sadness.

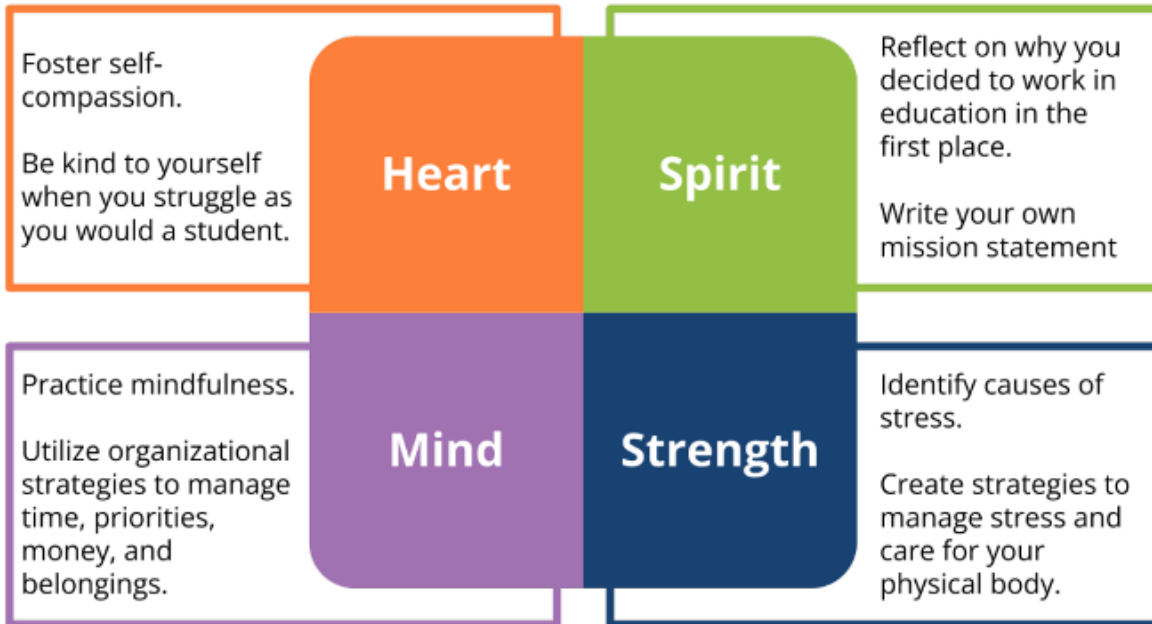
**Compassion resilience serves as the antidote to burnout and compassion fatigue and is defined as the “the ability to maintain physical, emotional, and mental well-being while compassionately supporting others through the challenges of daily work” through proactive response and prevention.**

**Reference:**

[Compassion Resilience Toolkit for Schools](#)

Central to compassion resilience are strong relationships and healthy emotional expression (the heart); identification of and with core values, time for rest and play (the spirit); caring for one’s body/managing and identifying physical symptoms of stress (strength); as well as mindfulness and strategies to support school/work demands (the mind). **This resilience can be conceptualized as a reservoir of well-being you can turn to on particularly difficult days, allowing you to remain present and effective in challenging situations.**

## Components of Compassion Resilience



Source: Compassion Resilience Toolkit. (2019). Compassion Resilience. Retrieved from <https://compassionresiliencetoolkit.org/schools/>

### Reference:

[Building a Culture of Faculty and Staff Compassion Resilience](#)

### Resource:

[What Are We Talking About?](#) Provides additional information on what compassion fatigue vs. compassion resilience looks like.

## Compassion-Based Strategies and Tools

### Managing Compassion Fatigue Resource:

[Compassion Fatigue](#) provides a five-step exercise to shift from a place of judgment to compassion in difficult interactions with others (e.g., students, colleagues, etc.).

### Assessing Your Self-Compassion Resources:

[Activity: Self-Compassion Scale](#)

[Test How Self-Compassionate You Are](#)

Calculate your level of self-compassion and the specific areas/components of self-compassion and you can further strengthen and improve in terms of your self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity,

isolation, mindfulness and over-identification.

# Community Culture Around Trauma

## Trauma Informed Communication

There are four key components to making a script trauma informed that can be especially useful in setting boundaries, clarifying expectations or communicating difficult information. These components can help not only the recipient of your words remain regulated and able to engage but also help you stay regulated.

### Components of a trauma informed script

**Validating or normalizing** conveys that you understand what else could be going on for someone.

**Being clear and direct** is really important for a stressed brain. Complete information helps avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

**Providing the “why”** helps establish a sense of consistency and predictability.

**Providing options and choice** helps empower and create hope.

#### Reference:

[The Anatomy of a Trauma-Informed Script](#)

#### Resource:

[Building Compassion-Based Communication with Caregivers](#)

See below for tips and example scripts to help educators prepare for conversations with caregivers that emphasize compassion-based relationships in working together to share observations about student behavior and determine how to best support children’s academic achievement and well-being:

### A sample conversation:

- I see these positives about your child's behavior... This important first comment to a caregiver needs to be based on what the caregiver values. You might even ask, *"What would you most like to hear me say about your child?"*
- I am having a hard time finding ways to connect with your child lately. I was wondering if we could put our thoughts about your child together so I can get a better sense of how I can support his/her learning and growth this year.
- I see some behaviors that are causing your child to struggle with (friends, academics, activities, etc.).
- The specific behaviors that I notice are...
- I am wondering what you notice at home.
- Wait to see if the caregiver responds. They may say that they see the same behavior or not.
- If not – Thank-you for that insight. I am glad to hear that your son/daughter does not have these challenges outside of school. Maybe you could help me find ways to bring that positive into the school environment.
- If yes – Thank you for that insight. Maybe we can work together to understand how to provide a better environment in the school that supports your son/daughter to learn and practice skills.
- I have tried these strategies to connect with your child. They are not working as well as I had hoped. Can you give me some ideas about what you have found to be helpful? Or...
- I would like to get some advice on what might be most helpful to your child. I would really benefit from the input of... (use name first, then give title) our school... (learning specialist, counselor, social worker, psychologist).
- Would you like me to share with you what I learn and decide to try in the classroom.

## Creating a Script of Your Own:

The principles above provide important components of a script to keep in mind when forming your response to trauma-affected students. **Next, we will provide a framework originally created for Dialectical Behavioral Therapy.**

The acronym DEAR MAN was created to help guide individuals with effective interpersonal communication and make sure their needs are being met. This framework can provide guidance on how to form your response to a child while also meeting the needs of the classroom. This framework can be tailored to fit individual situations. For instance, if you simply want to show understanding and not ask the student to change anything, you may remove the "Assert" piece of DEAR MAN.

|           |                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Describe  | Describe the situation <i>objectively</i> . This means sticking to the facts by avoiding opinion and interpretation. The goal is to get everyone on the same page.                                     |
| Express   | Let others know how a situation makes you feel by clearly expressing your feelings. Don't expect others to read your mind. Try using this line: " <i>I feel ___ because ___.</i> "                     |
| Assert    | Don't beat around the bush—say what you need to say.<br><i>Don't say:</i> "Oh, well, I don't know if I can cook tonight or not."<br><i>Do say:</i> "I won't be able to cook because I'm working late." |
| Reinforce | Reward people who respond well, and reinforce why your desired outcome is positive. This can be as simple as a smile and a " <i>thank you</i> ".                                                       |
| Mindful   | Don't forget the objective of the interaction. It can be easy to get sidetracked into harmful arguments and lose focus.                                                                                |
| Appear    | Appear confident. Consider your posture, tone, eye contact, and body language.                                                                                                                         |
| Negotiate | No one can have everything they want out of an interaction all the time. Be open to negotiation.<br><i>Do say:</i> "If you wash the dishes, I'll put them away."                                       |

**Reference:**

[Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills](#)

**Applying DEAR MAN:**

Billy is a student in your third-grade classroom who is affected by trauma. When Billy gets upset, he starts to yell and direct inappropriate language at his classmates and at you. You decide to take Billy aside and use a DEAR MAN with him. This is how you might want to frame your script:

**Describe:** "Billy, you have been raising your voice at me and your friend Dylan. You have told Dylan that he is stupid and you have told me to shut up."

**Express:** "When you yell at me and tell me to shut up it makes me feel like you are not listening to me or respecting me."

**Ask:** "Billy, I need you to respect our classroom norms of using a respectful tone and positive language."

**Reinforce:** "Thank you for agreeing to use a respectful tone. I really want you in our classroom and want you to have a great rest of the day." (If Billy agrees to stop yelling, it is important to acknowledge this as well)

## **The MAN piece of DEAR MAN is not about what you say, but how you say it and approach the situation.**

**Mindful:** It is important as an educator that you are mindful of your objective of the conversation. Do not get lost in frustration and lose track of your goal for Billy to stop his hurtful behavior.

**Appear:** It is important to appear confident. As the teacher, you should be the one guiding the direction of the conversation.

**Negotiate:** Negotiation is not always effective or possible in the classroom. For instance, with Billy, yelling at other classmates may not be up for negotiation. What may be up for negotiation is how he chooses to stop yelling. Perhaps you negotiate strategies for him to calm down by offering him a choice to sit in the peace corner, go to a buddy classroom or use Play-Doh to change his focus.